



PREF music program hitting all the right notes

By Wade Coggeshall

PLAINFIELD—

Music was just a hobby for Bob Groves. But since he became the volunteer director of the Plainfield Re-entry Educational Facility's flourishing music program, "It's back to being a passion again."

The retired businessman from Clayton is a member of the Screaming Eagles, a model airplane club that conducts programs with PREF residents. Last year, Judy Helms, PREF's community services director, began asking volunteers at the facility if any of them were interested in leading a music program there. Having played guitar since 1965, Groves agreed to give it a try.

Lessons began in June 2006, using six acoustic guitars leftover from when the facility was a boys' school. Groves, who prior to this had only given music lessons to relatives, started with four students. It's now grown to about 10 students and a group of accomplished musicians that's 30 strong.

There are four active bands on the campus, playing everything from country and blues to rock and metal, even reggae.

"I get a lot of camaraderie out of this," Groves says. "It's fun to see someone learn and flourish. And the strong support I've gotten from management here has kept me coming back."

Currently, lessons are given in drums and lead, rhythm, and bass guitar. A volunteer keyboard instructor is still being sought. To participate, residents are required to attend at least one class and one practice session per week, and teach incoming students when they reach proficiency.

"That's what makes us special," Groves says. "I require students, once they get accomplished, to teach others coming into the program. The best way to learn is to teach."

"It's pretty much put me out of a job, though," he said. "I'm more of a coordinator now."

The biggest challenge is ensuring there are enough teachers for the students.

"There's always new people coming in but others leaving," Groves says. "That's the nature of PREF. I'm always hoping some who join the program are already accomplished players."

The ones who do join don't leave voluntarily. Groves says the dropout rate remains low for such a difficult activity.

"Music does take a lot of effort to learn," he says. "Not everyone is cut out for it."

It's helped that the program has received so much support. Local music stores 6 Strings Down and Guitars Plus have provided support services and discounts. Local band Aces Wild has played two free shows at PREF — not just to entertain, but to inspire.

"We've gotten excellent support from the music fraternity here," Groves said.

But what Groves considers the program's crowning achievement is a \$1,500 grant he received from the Guitar Center Music Foundation, a group dedicated to reinvigorating music education in schools.

"PREF was the only correctional facility in the country to get a grant from the foundation," Groves said proudly.

Some heavy hitters sit on Guitar Center's board, including Santana and Les Paul. The grant was used to buy \$6,000 worth of first-class equipment, thanks to discounts.

Residents who have taken advantage of the program have prospered. One guy who never played an instrument before joining is now in a band since being released from PREF. Tim Graham, who grew up playing drums with his father, has done so well he's now certified to teach music theory. It's not just chops that he's learned.

"It's taught me the importance of communication in everything I do," Graham said. "To play good music, you have to play well with others. That takes good communication. And musicians aren't always the easiest people to communicate with. But when you come up with something that people want to hear, it's one of the best feelings."

The program's proven successful enough that Groves has been asked to talk about it at the next statewide meeting of the Indiana Department of Correction's recreation directors. He's enthusiastic about the opportunity to spread the inspiration he's witnessed at PREF.

"One of my students had been incarcerated a long time," Groves said. "His first day in the program, I handed him a bass and he had tears in his eyes. He told me he'd waited years to get his hands on a guitar. They're all hungry for this."

PREF's music program accepts donated music instruments. To make a donation, contact Helms by calling 839-7751 ext. 4416 or by e-mailing to jehelms@doc.in.gov.

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